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SUBJECT: MACEDONIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: A SCENESETTER

Classified By: CDA Tom Navratil for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The ruling VMRO choice for president, Georgi Ivanov, will likely win and further consolidate PM Gruevski's hold on power. SDSM's candidate, Ljubomir Frckoski, is unlikely to win and may not even come in second. Former Interior Minister Ljube Boskovski could threaten VMRO's party discipline, but not enough to upset Ivanov. E-Albanians will likely divide their votes along party lines. Their votes will be highly sought-after in the second-round runoff, yet may be unavailable to any e-Macedonian candidate. An Ivanov presidency is probably not good news for U.S. interests. End summary.

A Crowded Field

¶2. (U) On election day March 22, Macedonian voters will choose from six main contenders to replace Branko Crvenkovski as President: former Minister of Interior and acquitted ICTY-indictee Ljube Boskovski (former VMRO-DPMNE, now independent), former Minister for Transport and Communications Agron Buxhaku (DUI), Law Professor and former Interior and Foreign Minister Ljubomir Frckoski (SDSM), academic Mirushe Hoxha (DPA, the only woman among the main candidates), Political Science Professor Georgi Ivanov (ruling VMRO-DPMNE), and former Health Minister Imer Selmani (New Democracy--ND). These candidates will be joined by a host of hopefuls from small parties and some independents, none of whom will garner many votes.

¶3. (U) Since the president must receive 50% plus one of the votes, this election will almost certainly require two rounds. The top two vote-getters from the first round proceed to the second, already scheduled for April 5. For the first time in Macedonia's short history, presidential elections will run concurrently with nationwide municipal elections (scenesetter septel). Parliament recently amended the constitution to mandate only a 40% turnout threshold for the second round. It had been 50%, but it has been difficult in previous presidential elections to reach this threshold. Contacts tell us that in the past officials have quietly stuffed ballots to ensure reaching the 50% threshold, though without changing the winner. Under the Macedonian constitution, should turnout in the second round fail to meet the 40% threshold, the entire electoral process would need to be repeated. The Speaker of Parliament, Trajko Veljanovski, would serve as interim president. PM Gruevski had lobbied hard for a 30% threshold, but had to settle for 40% at the insistence of the other parties, including his main coalition partner, DUI. The PM has warned that the 40% threshold will still be difficult to achieve.

¶4. (SBU) The threshold requirement places a somewhat disproportionate importance on e-Albanian voters, who comprise at least 25% of the population. Especially with the three largest e-Albanian parties each running its own candidate, and given that voters rarely cross ethnic lines,

it is highly unlikely that any e-Albanian candidate will make it to the second round. In turn, none of the three main e-Macedonian candidates -- Boskovski, Ivanov, and Frckoski -- are popular among e-Albanians.

Can SDSM Exploit a Divided VMRO?

15. (C) Ivanov, Frckoski, and Boskovski present a mixed choice to the voters. Boskovski asserts to us that he is far more popular within VMRO than Ivanov, but VMRO is famous for its strict party discipline, and the party leadership has lined up firmly for Ivanov. Stories are already circulating -- all of them hard to verify -- that VMRO is threatening the employment of any party member who would dare support another candidate. Boskovski's likely best chance among hard-line VMRO supporters would be to run to Ivanov's right by proclaiming himself as a national hero who went to jail (i.e., The Hague) for defending Macedonia against terrorists. Yet his rhetoric thus far has been far different (see para. 12).

16. (C) Ivanov's job, presumably, is to say as little as possible of interest and run a bland, safe campaign as the VMRO standard-bearer. He can spar with his opponents, criticize Greece on the name issue (mom and apple pie here), promise to serve all Macedonian citizens, and let his surrogates play dirty.

17. (C) Several contacts have told us Frckoski is a bad choice for SDSM, and that his main job will be to serve as attack dog against VMRO and Ivanov but who has almost no chance to

SKOPJE 00000049 002 OF 004

win. Of course, most observers cannot see any scenario where SDSM wins the presidency: the party is still reeling from big losses in 2006 and 2008 parliamentary elections and -- officially at least -- suffers from a leadership vacuum until Crvenkovski leaves office and formally takes over the party helm again. But even though Frckoski enjoys a much higher public profile than Ivanov, he is not particularly popular outside elite SDSM-leaning circles (and sometimes not even there).

The Quick Rise and Fall of Srjan Kerim

18. (C) One name apparently certain not to be on the ballot is Srjan Kerim, the former foreign minister, diplomat, and businessman (unaffiliated with any party) who -- on paper at least -- was likely the most qualified candidate and, more importantly, led in almost every recent public opinion poll. On Jan. 13, the leading opposition party SDSM publicly offered that Kerim run as a consensus VMRO-SDSM candidate. VMRO, however, had already decided on Ivanov, but had not yet announced his candidacy. Less than an hour later, they did so, releasing a brief statement announcing that a "leading group of intellectuals and influential party members" led by DPM Zoran Stavreski was throwing its weight behind Ivanov.

19. (C) Kerim was not ready to give up, but made it clear in several conversations with the Ambassador that he could not envision running except as a consensus candidate. Finally, on Jan. 21, Kerim announced his withdrawal. Kerim also told us that -- VMRO's claims that its nomination process was open and democratic to the contrary -- numerous senior VMRO members told him that they wanted to support him but were pressured by the party leadership to line up for Ivanov. Despite the fact that VMRO did not confirm Ivanov as its candidate until Jan. 25, sources in the printing business have told us that they had long ago filled orders for VMRO for Ivanov campaign posters.

Frckoski: A Surprise Choice for SDSM

¶10. (C) On Jan. 26, SDSM announced that its candidate would be Frckoski, even though he was not actually a party member. (Ivanov likewise was not a member of VMRO.) SDSM Sec-Gen Igor Ivanovski told us that SDSM believes Frckoski is a strong candidate and may draw enough e-Albanian votes in the second round to win. However, Ivanovski went on, SDSM remains concerned that VMRO and its coalition partner DUI -- Macedonia's largest e-Albanian party -- have or will cut a deal to exchange VMRO support for DUI's candidates in local elections for DUI's support of Ivanov. Frckoski's first wife (they divorced) is Albanian and he was a strong supporter of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, yet many observers doubt that this will be enough to draw e-Albanians to the polls to make a difference. DUI's candidate, Buxhaku, told us Jan. 29 that DUI may well support Ivanov in the second round.

¶11. (C) Frckoski is intelligent, mercurial, and -- many say -- arrogant. He supports policies that are generally in our interests: He favors a reasonable compromise with Greece on the name issue and is a strong supporter of rule of law and Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic vocation. His weekly column for the daily Dnevnik is widely read (the paper has higher circulation on Tuesdays, when he writes), and he often uses it to bash PM Gruevski's government. Indeed, Gruevski successfully sued Frckoski for slander last month, collecting 30,000 Euros in damages for a piece in which Frckoski claimed that Gruevski -- while serving as finance minister in a previous government -- signed certain documents regarding the privatization of the Okta refinery which caused the state to lose money. Frckoski is also known for his temper: in a well-publicized event last year, he got into a fistfight over a parking space. Like so many politicians here, Frckoski is not untouched by claims of corruption, primarily during his tenure as Minister of Interior and, later, Foreign Affairs.

Brat Ljube: Does He Run Left or Right...or Both?

¶12. (C) But the prize for "colorful" goes to former VMRO Interior Minister, Ljube Boskovski. Despite his past, Boskovski is running on a platform of ethnic reconciliation and the importance of Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic future. He has also publicly called for a reasonable compromise with Greece on the name issue. "Brat Ljube" ("Brother Ljube") has assiduously sought out support from the international community. Given his past (see reftel), this has been slow in coming. Polling indicates that Boskovski enjoys high positives (in one IRI poll, second only to Kerim), but also

SKOPJE 00000049 003 OF 004

high negatives. It is also clear that VMRO is quite worried about him, perhaps seeing as a potential rival to Gruevski who might attempt to split the party in two.

¶13. (C) Despite Boskovski's claim to be a candidate for all citizens of the country and his retention of two e-Albanian full-time campaign workers (of ten), every e-Albanian politician tells us that Boskovski is despised in this community, primarily for his actions while Interior Minister in the 2001 conflict. More than a few have said quite plainly: "He's crazy." Buxhaku recalled to us showing shocked Europeans photos of e-Albanian children allegedly killed by Boskovski's Interior Ministry forces in 2001. In conversations with us, however, Boskovski presents himself as the ultimate conciliator: If elected he would make his first foreign trip to Athens, drop Macedonia's case against Greece in the ICJ, and solve the name issue; he would make NATO and EU accession his top priority; he would pardon all e-Albanians accused of war crimes in the four cases returned to Macedonia by the ICTY last year.

Ivanov: Scary?

¶14. (C) Georgi Ivanov, VMRO's candidate, is not well-known, has no political or diplomatic experience, displays little

charisma, and will probably win. Rumors abound -- though not directly confirmed -- that he is a close advisor to Gruevski and a strong proponent of Macedonian historicism, reaching back to history to prove e-Macedonians' direct links to Alexander the Great and a storied past. Others suggest he is a proponent of Putinism and stronger ties with Russia, a charge he hotly denied to the Ambassador. Some months ago, long before he was a candidate, Ivanov sent Embassy employees he had met at a reception a scientific article from 2001 entitled "HLA genes in Macedonians and the sub-Saharan origin of the Greeks." The authors of the article claim their results "support the theory that Macedonians are one of the most ancient peoples existing in the Balkan peninsula, probably long before arrival of the Mycaenian Greeks about 2000 B.C.... The cultural, historical and genetic identity of Macedonians is established according to our results."

¶15. (C) This was just a genetics article and Ivanov did not write it, but it does fit Ivanov's reputation. In his Jan. 23 meeting with the Ambassador, Ivanov denied that he holds any views glorifying Macedonia's ancient past. He laughed off such reports as just rumors, asserting they were based on wild exaggerations of the fact that he taught about Alexander only in the context of courses on ancient political systems, and that he is similarly interested in all phases of Macedonian history to the present.

¶16. (C) We found Ivanov difficult to pin down on questions of U.S. interest. He said that claims by e-Albanian critics that he opposed the Ohrid Framework Agreement were just playing politics, then launched into a (to us almost unintelligible) academic explanation of how the Framework Agreement runs contrary in general terms to his preferred model of government. As for the name dispute, Ivanov refused to explain how he would deal with this issue as president, stating that "an absurd problem only produces an absurd solution."

Selmani: No Obama Effect

¶17. (C) Selmani told us Jan. 22 that he is realistic about his chances, but he sees his candidacy as a chance to publicize his new party and perhaps help the chances of some ND candidates in local elections when he comes to campaign. Selmani asserted that a number of e-Macedonians have pledged their support to him, attracted by his moderate rhetoric and style (and perhaps also by his superior Macedonian language skills, which he may speak better than Albanian). Selmani said that, like many e-Albanians, he is inspired by President Obama's election and hopes to see the day when an e-Albanian is elected president of Macedonia.

¶18. (C) Some observers here speculated that -- had Selmani been the only e-Albanian candidate-- he may have had an outside chance to make the second round. Now that DUI and DPA have stepped forward (as they did rather suddenly Jan. 27, only a week before the deadline), this is almost impossible. Neither DUI nor DPA is putting forth a formidable candidate, but in particular DUI -- which we believe had been embroiled in an intense internal debate about whether to partner with VMRO in the presidential race -- may have felt compelled to do so in order to put an end to rumors that the party will support its VMRO coalition

SKOPJE 00000049 004 OF 004

partner's candidate -- Ivanov -- at least in the first round. Perhaps more important, both DUI and DPA likely could not stomach the idea of Selmani and his party becoming stronger politically by a successful presidential run.

And For Us? Likely Bad News

¶19. (C) An Ivanov victory appears unlikely to advance U.S. interests in Macedonia. At a minimum, there will be one less

check against Gruevski's overreaching in areas of rule of law and democratic pluralism. If indeed Ivanov wants to point the country toward Putinism and a historicist construct which glorifies Macedonia's ancient past and further enrages Greece -- thus putting a solution to the name dispute further out of reach -- we could see a further deterioration of Macedonia's chances at Euro-Atlantic integration. Furthermore, Ivanov is not an impressive interlocutor and will probably not do well in winning support from European counterparts. However, Macedonia's presidency has limited powers, so our efforts to promote democracy and stability here depend mainly on influencing PM Gruevski to make sound decisions.

NAVRATIL